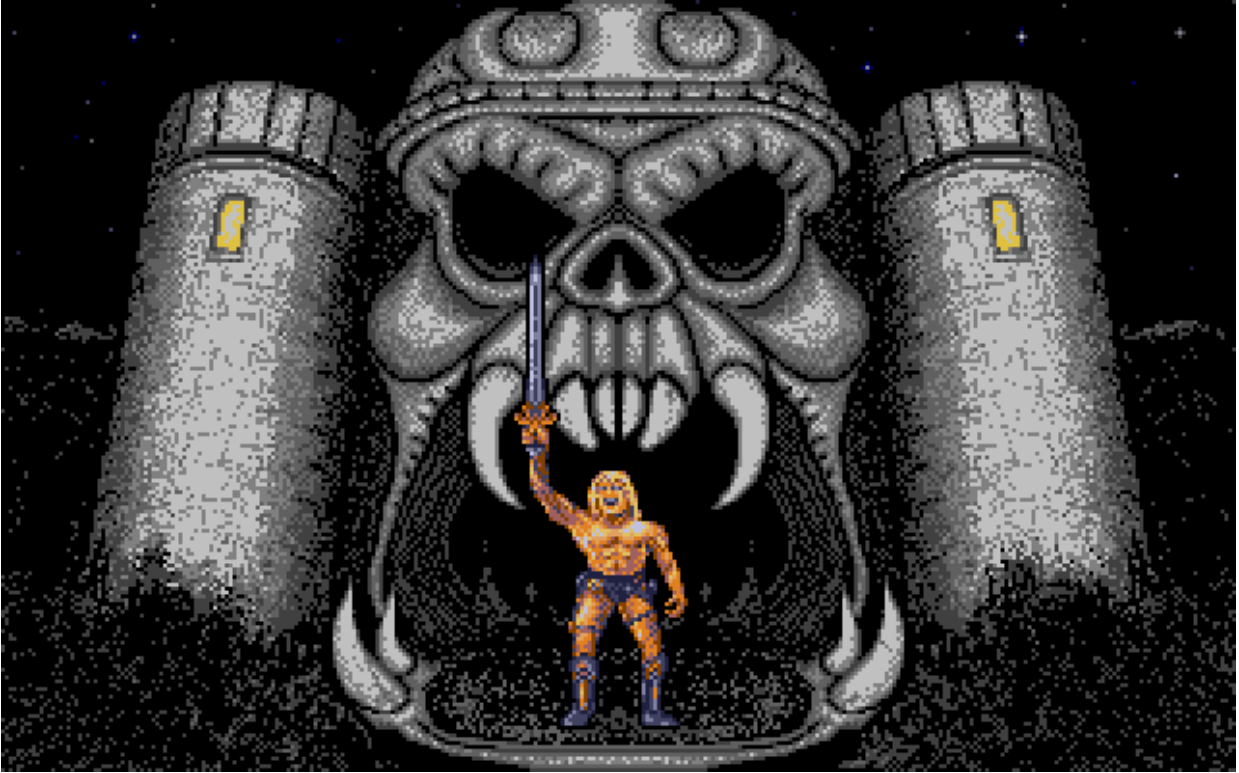


Live the journey

Written by dreamkatcha. Any related videos, as always, can be found on my YouTube channel.

None of this would have been possible without the fantastic resources generously provided by immensely talented emulator authors, and communities such as Hall of Light, Lemon Amiga, Lemon 64, World of Spectrum, Moby Games, World of Longplays and Recorded Amiga Games. Thank you for your tireless dedication to preserving the history of gaming.

You're not supposed to like Masters of the Universe, the 1987 live-action interpretation of the 1983 cartoon starring Prince Adam of Eternia who transformed into He-Man whenever he held aloft his mighty sword and uttered the magic words, "By the power of Grayskull, I have the power."



Produced with a meagre budget of \$22m courtesy of struggling studio, Cannon Films, it recouped just \$17.3m at the box office, landing it squarely in top of the flops territory. Along with Superman IV, Masters of the Universe's poor performance played a major part in the company's spiralling downfall.

Set on earth - New Jersey in fact, though actually filmed in Whittier, California - the fantasy realm of Eternia is relegated to a couple of pans of the same spartan backdrop to ensure many of the sets would be ready-made, and economical to dress. As Gwildor informs us, the posse "could be anywhere, any planet in the galaxy, any planet in a thousand galaxies", yet somehow they miraculously land on modern-day earth. Convenient that. Money was so tight Mattel paid for half of the marketing costs, and the director dedicated a portion of his salary to guarantee the ill-fated project came to fruition.



Acting newbie, one-man stunt team Dolph Lundgren, was threatened with having his entire leading role dubbed because Mattel weren't happy with his stilted dialogue and vacillating Swedish accent. If I were forced to wear the Collar Of Aldruber I'd have to admit he's campier than a cheesy Butlin's holiday, and swathes of die-hard, traditionalist fans of the original cartoon loathe the entire concept because it doesn't follow the continuity of the source material.

Skeletor's lair; Snake Mountain, Orka and Battle Cat were all cut to reduce overheads in an age before CGI was an acronym. Jabbing further spokes in the wheel of an already derailed production, other members of the He-Clan such as King Randor, Queen Marlena, King Miro and She-Ra were also conspicuously missing in action. Even He-Man himself was sidelined to become a mere bit-part player, while adding insult to injury, his name was dropped from the truncated title.

A Masters of the Universe sequel was proposed and a script written, yet never produced due to a number of multifarious, kibosh-wielding factors. These include the poor reception of the first movie, the studio swirling down the plughole as a consequence of financial difficulties (partially arising through the stock market crash of 1987, a heavy reliance on junk bonds and the mismanagement of funds), Mattel revoking Cannon Films' license due to a failure to compensate them for the privilege, and Dolph Lundgren demanding too much money to reprise his role. To swerve the latter issue, surfer Laird John Hamilton was instead to be cast as the lead, though it wasn't nearly enough to swing the balance.



Sadly crucifixion has yet to be outlawed in all parts of the world.

In spite of all its flaws, Masters of the Universe is a guilty pleasure that holds a treasured place in my heart, not least because I won my VHS copy by entering a newspaper crossword competition at a time when pre-release videos cost an extortionate £70. Back then if you'd missed the cinema showing, the next best thing was a trip to the local video rental store; a retail release wouldn't appear in Woolworths for about another year afterwards.



He-Man's daddy, designer Roger Sweet, possibly-maybe took the winning formula of Conan the Barbarian as his muse (see the CPI vs. Mattel court case), while movie director, Gary Goddard, blended the fantasy world of Eternia seamlessly with a Star Wars-style epic quest. The result was a good versus evil titanic clash, set to an almost copyright-infringing Superman-inspired soundtrack from Bill Conti. It's interesting to note that the same director also created, wrote and directed "The Adventures of Conan: A Sword and Sorcery Spectacular", a stage production commissioned by Universal Studios. On the strength of this accreditation, he was offered the MOTU role by producer, Edward R. Pressman.



Kicking off the action-packed pantomime, a vampire-fanged Skeletor - He-Man's arch-nemesis played by Frank Langella - orchestrates a dramatic assault on Castle Grayskull, abducting the Sorceress to seize her majestic supernatural power. He-Man has until the next moonrise to emancipate her, otherwise, she'll be drained to a withered husk. Oil of Olay doesn't work for everyone. Luckily they offer a no-quibble money-back guarantee.



He-Man: When we find the Key, Gwildor will set the coordinates for Grayskull. We'll use the element of surprise...

Duncan: Oh, sure! We'll drop right into the throne room, fight off two or three thousand of Skeletor's crack troops, break into the force field and free the Sorceress.

He-Man: Right!



Thenorian "locksmith and adventurer" who doesn't like adventures, Gwildor (a new character introduced for the movie to replace an inconveniently floating Orka), is rescued by He-Man, Man-At-Arms and his daughter, Teela, though not before Skeletor's right-hand henchwoman, Evil-Lyn, steals his Cosmic Key invention. Powered by sound keys, this allows the bearer to open a portal to other times and realms, so in the wrong hands it poses a bit of a dilemma as you can imagine.



Luckily Gwildor has a prototype to fall back on ...and a cunning plan; just before Skeletor's forces engulf the castle he twiddles the toggles and tweaks the wotsits to project our evictees to a potluck destination. Safe for the time being having been teleported to earth they realise that the key has been cast adrift, thus ensues a frantic scramble to track it down, return to Eternia and save the Sorceress.

Aping the movie's plot, Gremlin's coinciding computer game translation for the Amstrad, C64, Spectrum and Atari ST, opens in much the same way, though it *does* help to fill in the blanks if you're already familiar with the premise.

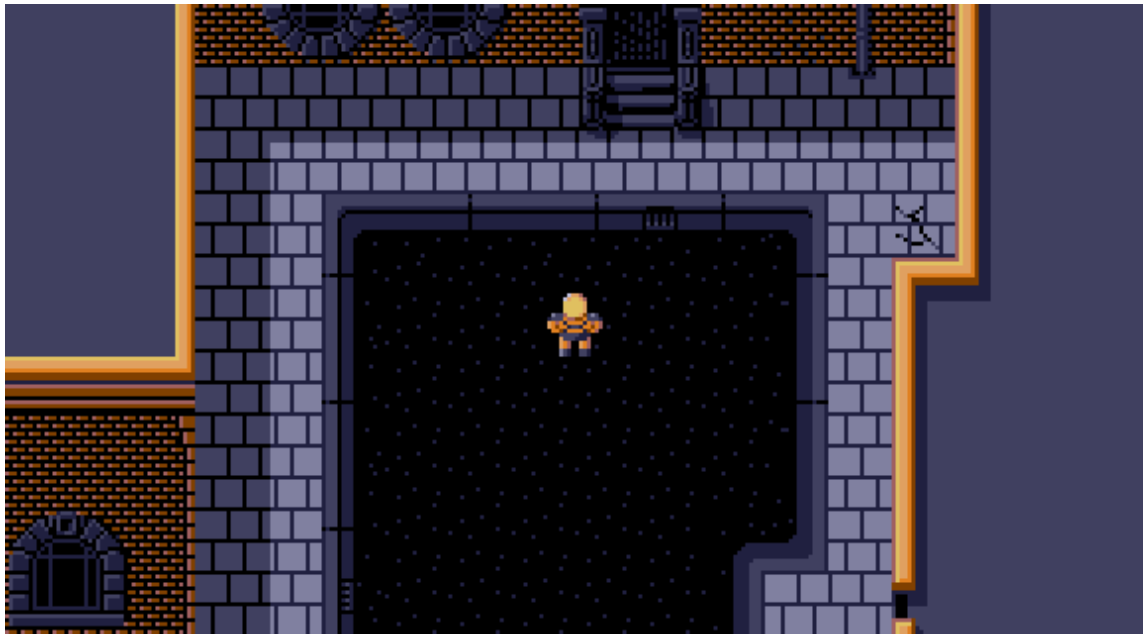
Development duties for the Commodore 64 version were divided between Robert Toone (design), Ben Dalglish (music), Terry Lloyd (graphics), Simon Phipps (intro graphics), Chris Shrigley (coding), and Drew Struzan (cover illustration).

Additionally, Greg A. Holmes was drafted in to write the Spectrum port, while Colin Dooley and Andy Green took charge of the coding for the Atari ST edition that followed in 1988.

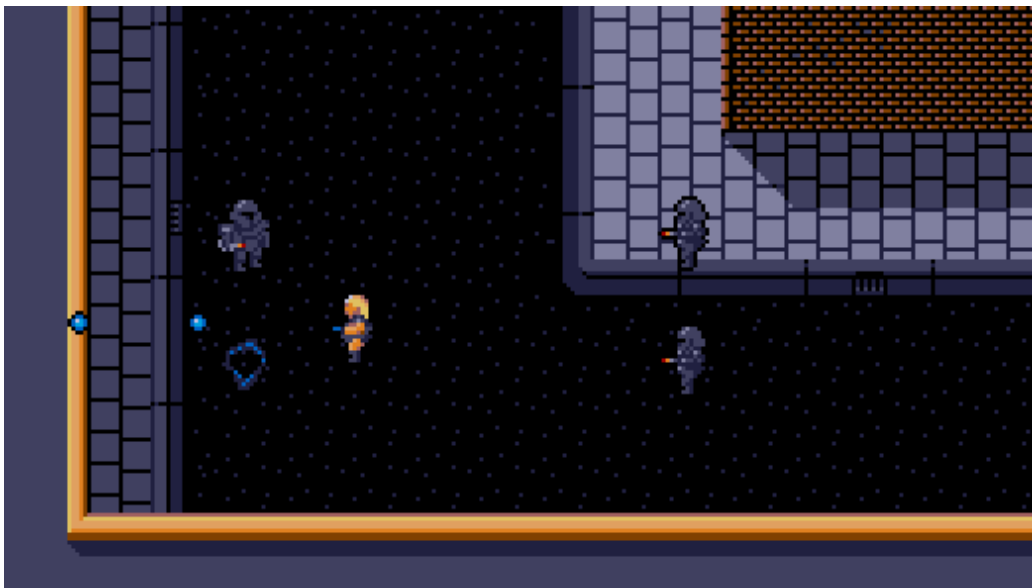


"Masters, for me lacks immediate playability to maintain interest. But if you're a fan of the cartoons or the film, you'll probably enjoy the game. It's interesting that the previous Masters of the Universe game by US Gold has now been released on the Americana label at a budget price. That's quite good as well."

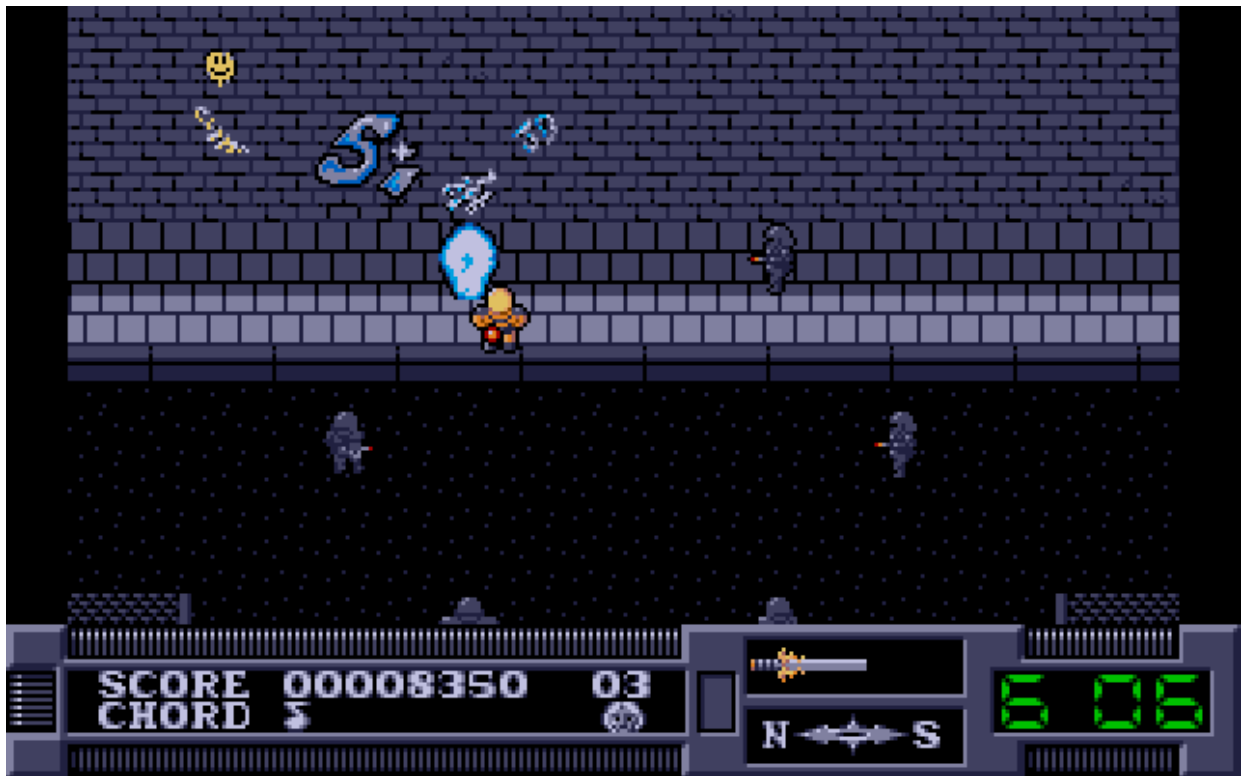
70% - C&VG, Amstrad & C64 version (February 1988)



We've landed in a similarly deserted urban setting (no extras were used in the movie because they weren't conducive to operating on a shoestring budget), seemingly based on the popular top-down Gauntlet style dungeon exploration genre. On foot, embodying the role of Dolph of course, we set off wandering the grimy New York back-streets armed with a fire blaster rather than one of the most famous swords of all time.



Our core objective is to recover all eight of the musical chords that will allow us to pinpoint the whereabouts of the key and activate it to return to the desolate wasteland desert we call home. At least that's the way it's depicted in the movie, the cartoon incarnation was *teeming* with vitality. In doing so we're thwarted by old bony face's minions dressed as stormtroopers and equipped with laser guns. In the movie, despite He-Man being an olde worlde fantasy-based franchise, the enemy goons are portrayed as *robots* to get around Mattel's aversion to blood, guts and killing sentient beings.



"I wouldn't describe Masters of the Universe as a program which pushed back the frontiers of programming, but it is very entertaining."

70% - Atari ST User (August 1988)



Each time we exit to the side of one of the flip-screens the environment reorients itself so west, east or south becomes the new north. A strange perspective choice that complicates navigation and makes you dizzy for no discernible benefit.

"Without any radical game redesign, Masters Of The Universe is a conversion that would have been best left undone."

52% - The Games Machine (July 1988)

Gwildor: If we dress like this, no one will recognise us.

Kevin Corrigan: What the hell is that?

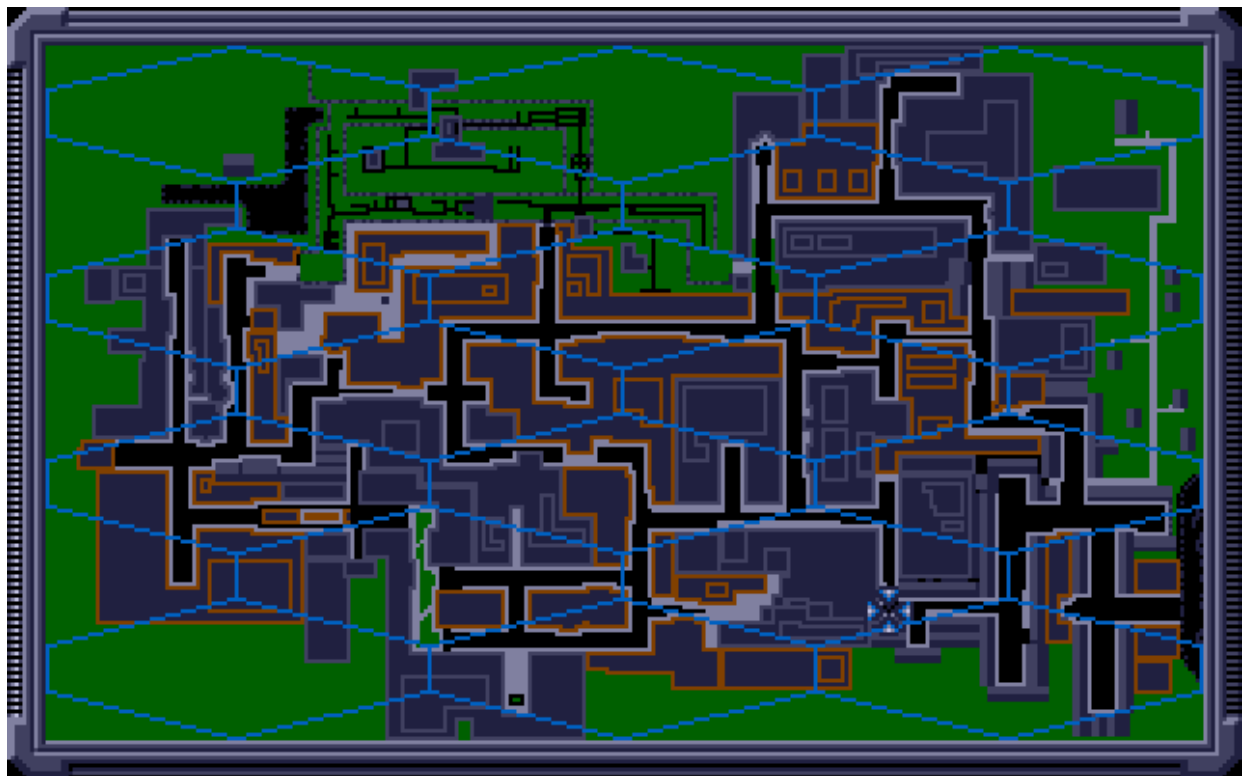
Gwildor: See! (chuckles)



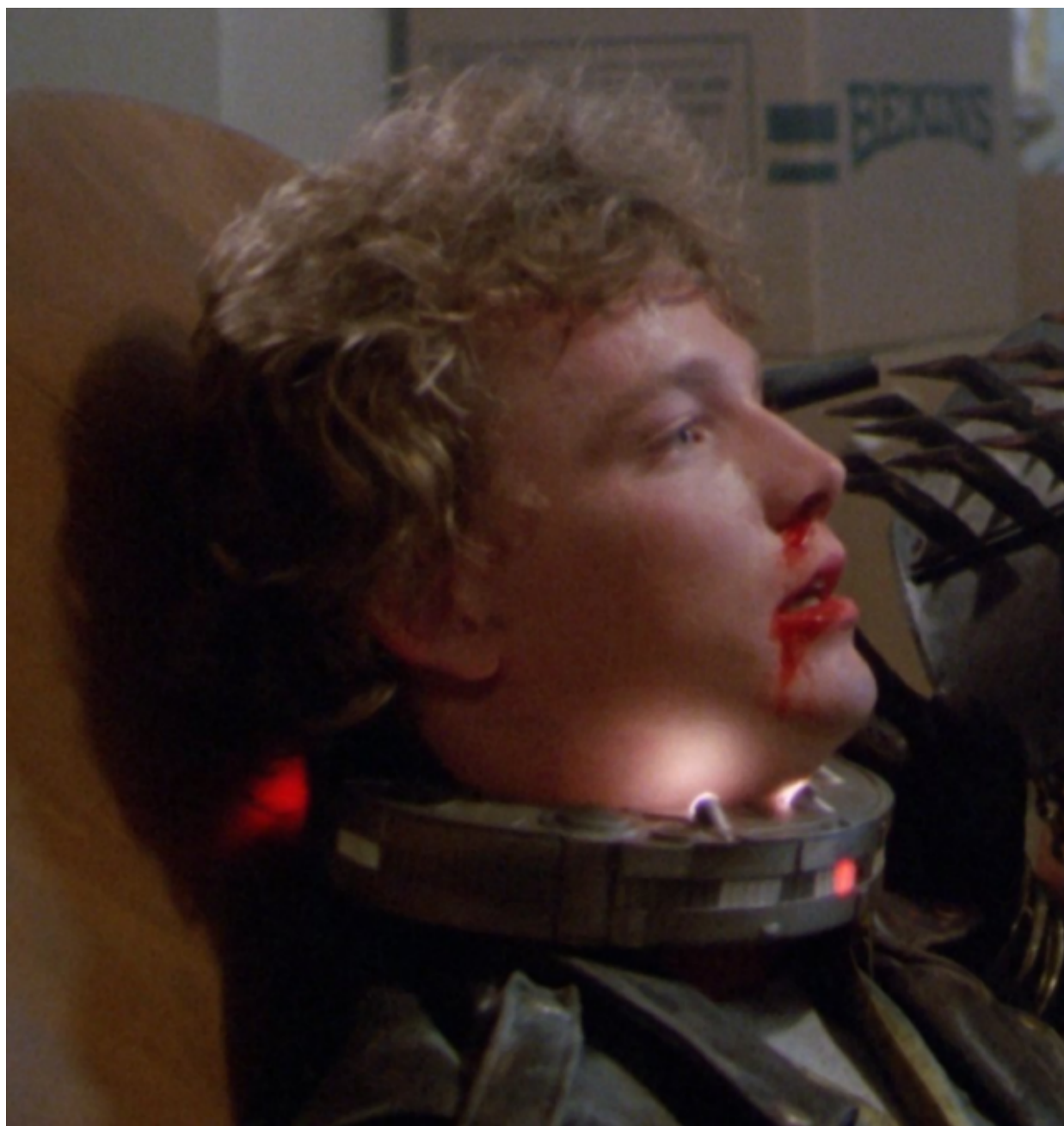
Periodically interrupting your journey are broadcasts from Teela and Gwildor who provide clues and directions leading to subsequent chords. Once you know your next destination you can hit the spacebar to bring up a map, which will help you get there in time; take too long and a pre-Friends Courtney Cox and her musician boyfriend will be gone, along with the chord.



Sorry, did I wake you? I'll knock next time.



Did I mention the key was found by two students who mistake it for a synthesiser? Well, it was, and in meddling with their new toy they tip off the naturally sinister-eyed Evil-Lyn who sets off in pursuit with her malevolent underlings in tow.



Could Principal Strickland from Back to the Future be the guardian angel they need to repel her advances? Spoiler: no,

he's more useless than an animatronic tiger without a battery. You see. You see what happens to slackers, McKevin?

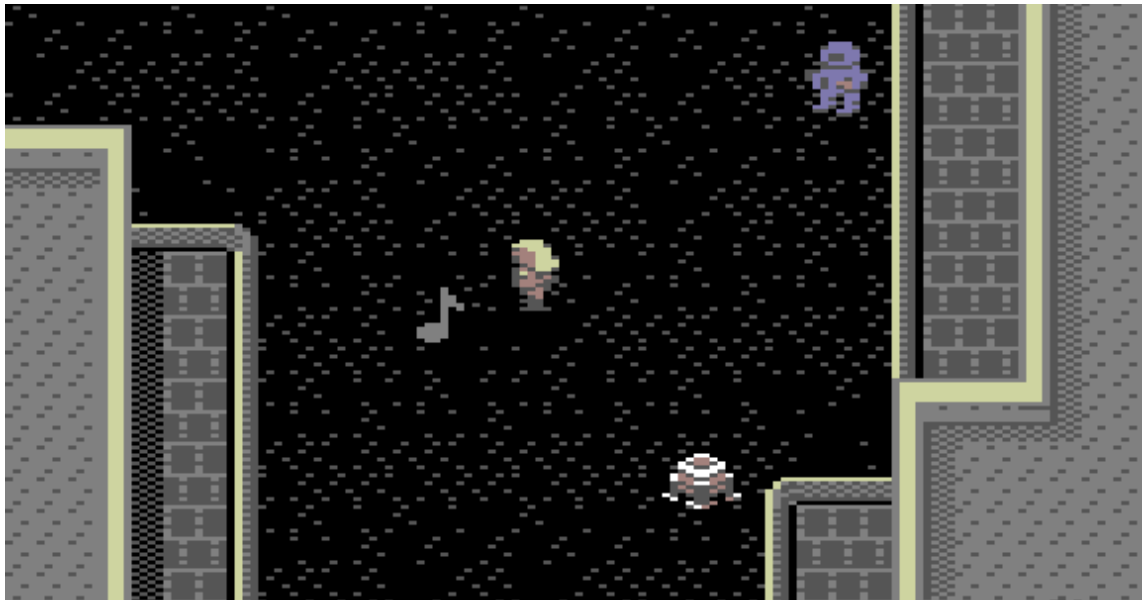


For a movie in which music plays such a pivotal role, you'd expect the in-game audio to be its high-water mark, and it *is*. A judiciously '80s-flared, multi-layered, SID chip synthesized soundtrack plays throughout should you choose that option. At one point, to accompany the street-trawling action, the composition gears up to a madcap electric guitar riff that puts me in mind of the one with which Michael J. Fox assaults an unsuspecting '50s audience at the Enchantment Under the Sea Dance. Alternatively, you can select to listen to the convincing laser-zappy sound effects in isolation.

Over in Camp Spectrum, a diluted rendition of the same track overlays the title screen, though weak, hollow bips and bops are all you'll hear in-game. In Atari ST Land the game opens with a static illustration of He-Man standing before Castle Grayskull menacing the sky with his Power Sword. Complementing the critical pose, our main event is ushered in with a snippet of digitised speech, possibly the voice of Dolph Lundgren himself, or perhaps courtesy of a cheap imposter. I'm sure I don't have to spell out which exalted line I'm referring to.

"A weak concept dressed up with a powerful license. It's cheaper and more rewarding to buy the toys and use your imagination, or to watch the TV series."

44% - Zzap!, C64 version (June 1987)



GAME OVER

YOU HAVE FAILED IN YOUR QUEST
TO SAVE THE SORCERESS
SKELETOR SHALL RULE ALL ETERNIA
AND BECOME MASTER OF THE UNIVERSE

*I don't know, that might not be so bad. Trump or Skeletor?
Skeletor or Trump? Hmm...*

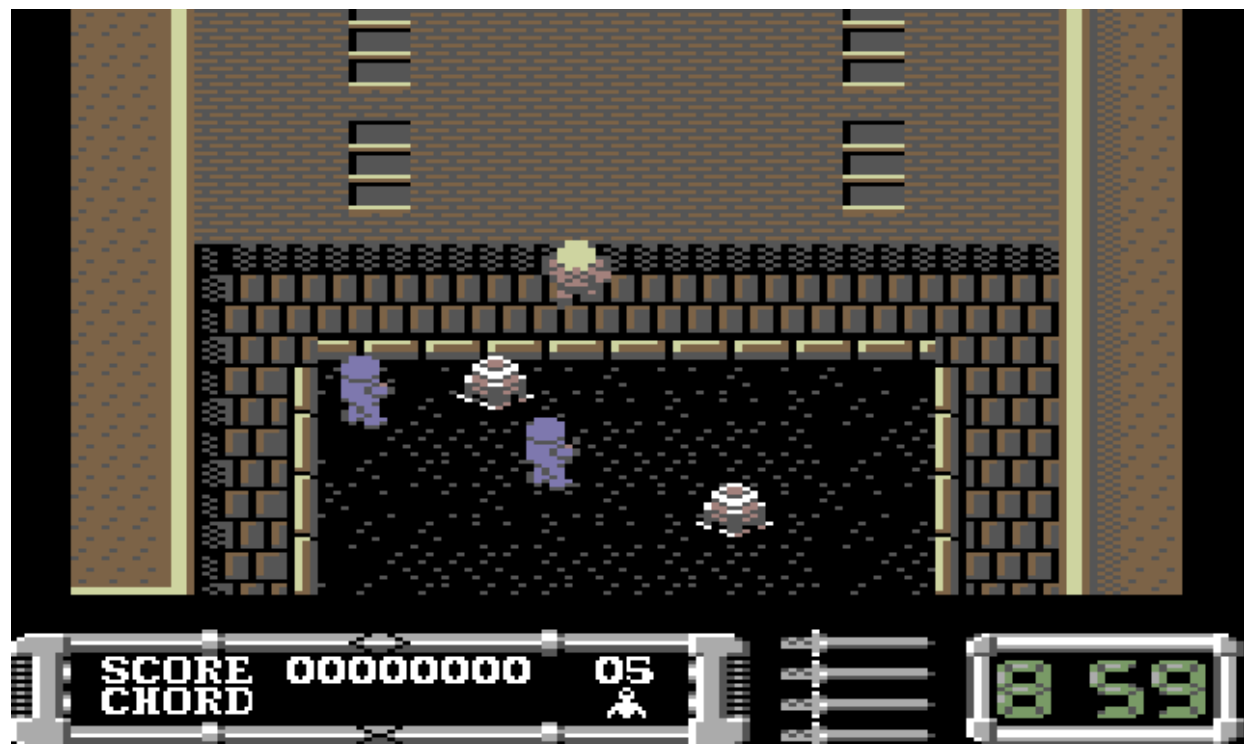


It now becomes clear why you don't have your sword to hand - it's lodged firmly in the HUD serving as your energy metre. This depletes as you absorb shots as you'd expect, yet can be replenished by collecting swords found in the street.

"The best of the lot, with faster action, decent intro music, and better graphics. You can even get an on-screen map by pressing the spacebar. Even with all these improvements, however, it's still not worth getting."

44% - ACE, C64 version (March 1988)





Your navigational guides lead you to a graveyard - no doubt the same one in which Monica's parents are buried (they died in a plane crash a year earlier making her an orphan) - and Charlie's Electronics Store where more chords can be accrued.



Julie Winston: I wish I could change things.

Kevin Corrigan: But you can't. That only happens in fairy tales.

Oh, we'll see. Sledgehammer foreshadowing at its finest!

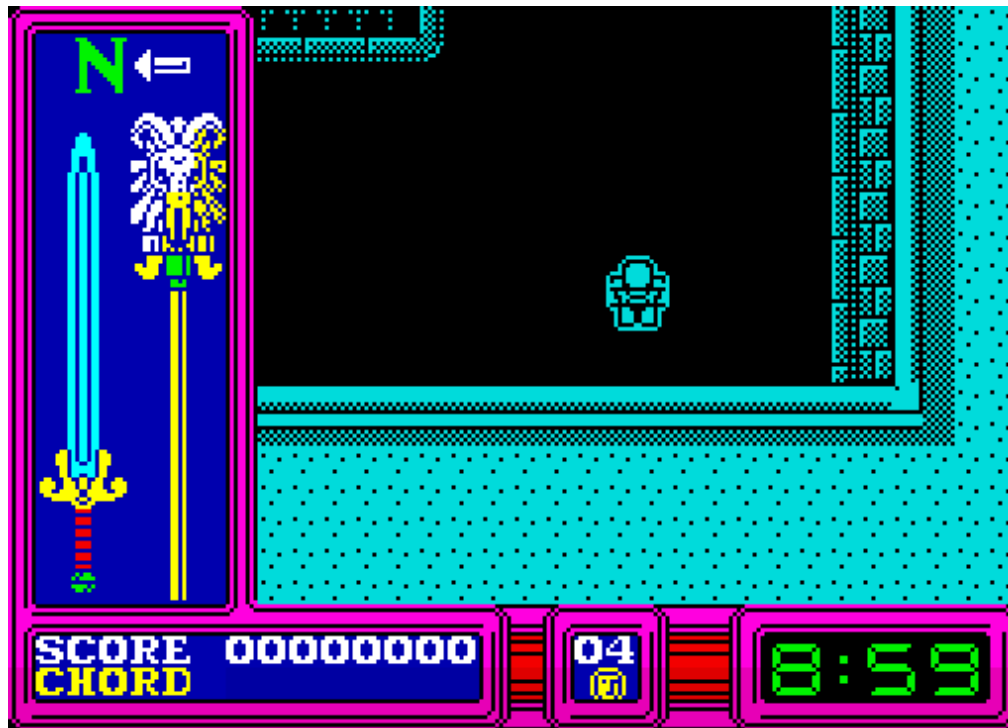


Entering the scrapyard, the game morphs into a side view, one on one beat 'em up pitting you against Skeletor's lackeys, Blade and Karg. Blasting them to smithereens with the gun you've been shooting up until this point would be far too easy, so unarmed combat is the order of the day. Your options are punch and kick, or kick and *then* punch. Feel free to mix it up to keep the brawls entertaining.

In true Ocean genre-intermingling fashion, entering the music store MOTU then becomes a first-person Operation

Wolf crosshair shooter where you're required to snipe at baddies that appear in the windows. Note that we've now managed to root out our gun again. How jolly convenient.





"It's debatable whether this product should ever have been on sale in the first place, but the best thing for Gremlin to do now would be to bin the entire stock and start work on something better."

"Glossy packaging and license raise your hopes - the game soon dashes them."

37% - ACE issue 6, Spectrum version (March 1988)

Back on the street we take a leaf out of Marty McFly's book, clambering atop our hoverboard, I mean 'Skimmer Disk'. A high-octane airborne laser battle commences commensurate (ish) with the silver screen version, culminating in an ultimatum from Skeletor: give yourself up or your friends will be exterminated. You're given two choices at this juncture, "come quietly" or "stand and fight". Acquiesce and you're hauled off to Castle Greyskull bound in chains as in the movie.



Now you're really up the creek - he's got The Power don'tcha know.

Either way, though you end up dancing the funky chicken with the freaky multicoloured dictator, in-game by way of another beat 'em up sequence. In the movie Skeletor was actually played by Anthony De Longis (Blade) during this

scene because he happens to be an adept swordsman and fight scene choreographer.

You've somehow managed to misplace your gun yet again so you'll have to offer him a knuckle sandwich instead, chipping away at the staff representing his life force one punch or kick at a time. Sadly Richard 'Pigboy' Szponder didn't put in an appearance to hand the latter to Skeletor as he approaches the throne (cool trivia alert, Google it!).

Dodge the fireballs he propels from his sunken peepers long enough to nudge him over the precipice of Castle Grayskull's throne room into the bubbling abyss awaiting below and your drudgery here is complete. With all eight chords retrieved you release the captive Sorceress and escape to Eternia with your new companions and old comrades.

"Slow gameplay, reasonably colourful, poor sound. Nothing here to compensate for the weak design of the game and the lack of addictive quality."

39% - ACE, Amstrad version (March 1988)



Not the most enthralling game ever, but then did anyone really expect any better from a slap-dash movie license tie-in that even Gremlin's Richard Barclay and Greg Holmes couldn't honestly champion?

"We could have put more money into the project, but then we couldn't have recouped our costs. If you spend ten times as much money on a game, you don't sell ten times as many."

Former Gremlin marketing manager, Richard Barclay. Now a freelance marketer, copywriter, proofreader and editor.

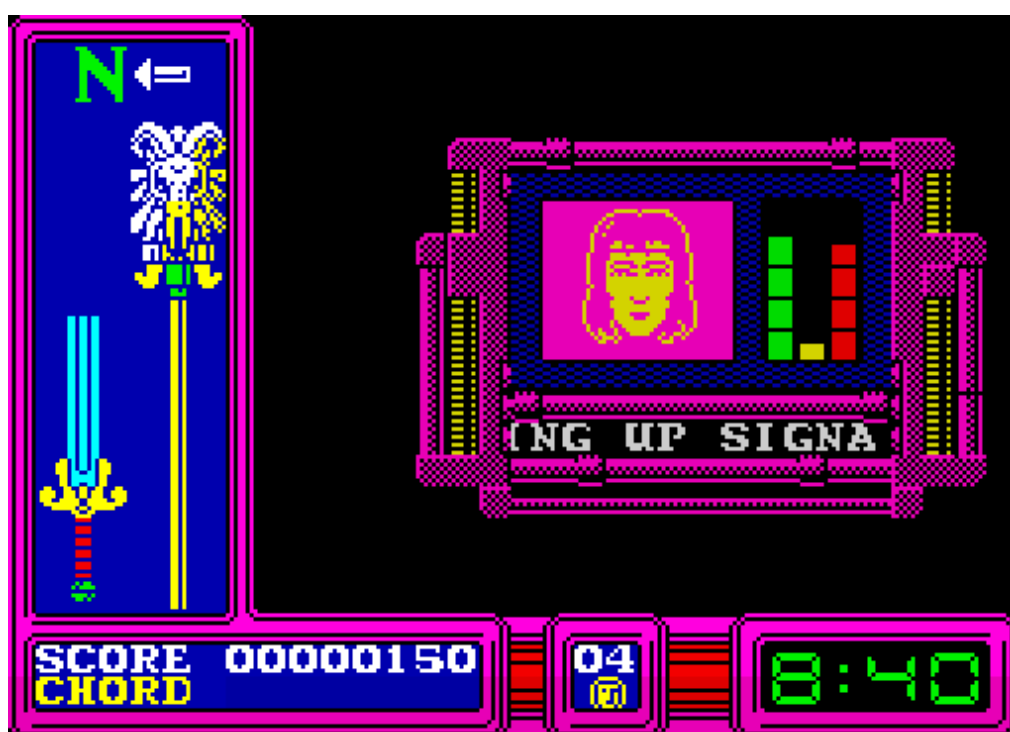
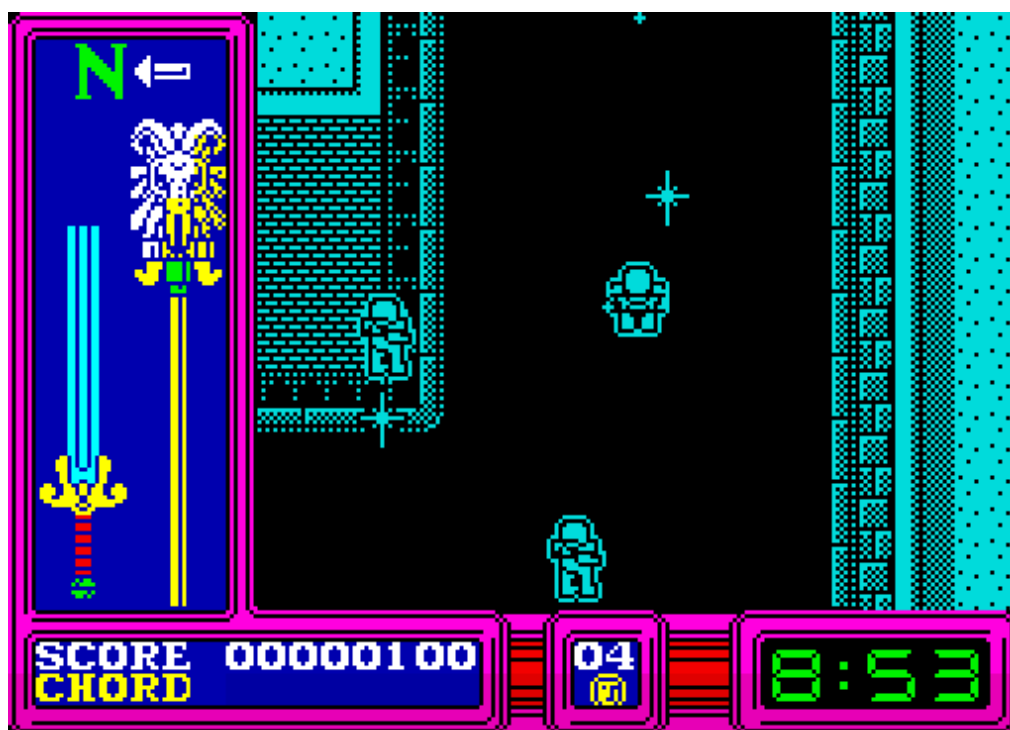
"We didn't necessarily want to do the product, we were told to aim for the younger market... And after all, there isn't really a lot in the film either, is there? We're not 100% happy with it, but for the kids we think it's good."

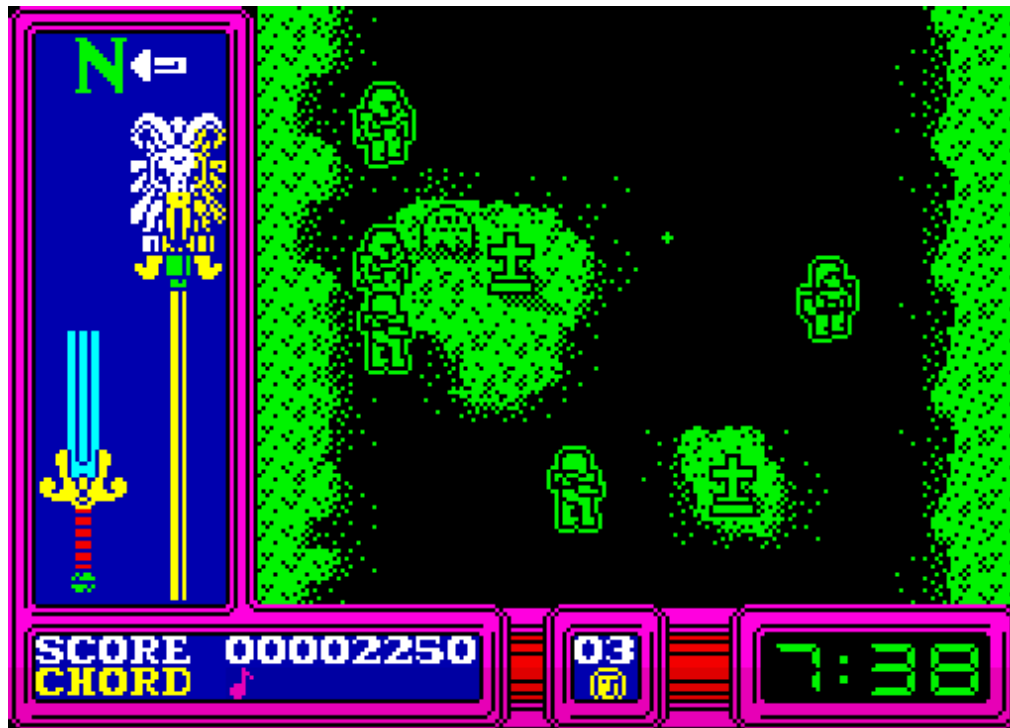
Former Gremlin coder, graphician and designer, Greg Holmes.

Refreshing to hear an absence of spin from a company who rely on healthy sales figures to survive, but still wrong on *both* counts. Producing top quality *retro* games doesn't need to cost a fortune; a talented individual or two and an 8-bit bedroom computer will do. The Oliver Twins and Matthew Smith proved that. Secondly, even the youngest kids can spot a gaming turkey, so it's not in anyone's interests to lower their standards assuming it's easier to hoodwink the little'uns.

"Worst of the lot. Some of the screens on this would have looked dismal in 1984. In 1988 it's simply unforgivable."

37% - ACE, Spectrum version (March 1988)





Of course, they can't *all* be Addams Family, though this is especially feeble given it was from a developer capable of so much more. Sloth-like controls and dull, uninspiring gameplay certainly don't help this one to climb out of the eternal pit of despair, even if it optimistically exclaims, "I'll be back!".